

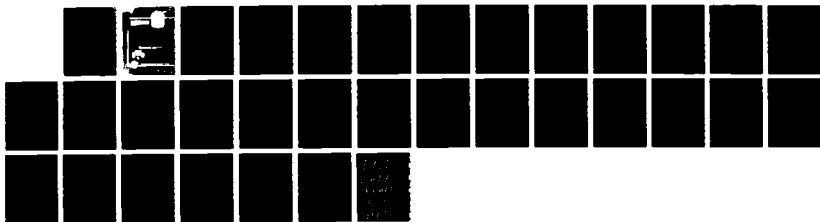
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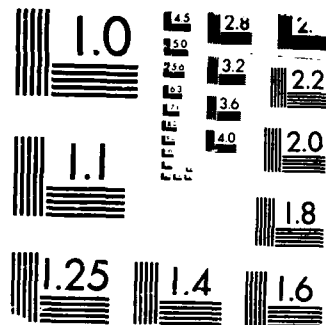
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THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR: A PRIMER

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL MICHAEL C. JONES, IN

FOR THE DIRECTOR OF THE ARMY CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS, WASHINGTON, DC 20315-5001

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THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR: A PRIMER  
AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

LTC Michael G. Jones, IN

LTC Clayton R. Newell  
Study Advisor

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# ABSTRACT

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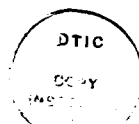
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# THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR: A PRIMER

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The operational level of war entered the Army's lexicon in the early 1980's. Wedged conceptually between military strategy and battlefield tactics, its core is the planning and execution of military campaigns. Surprisingly, the emergence of this fascinating new field of military study was slow to take hold among military professionals; however, its discovery is increasingly recognized as one of the most important changes in Army doctrine since World War II.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Army enjoys a rich history of successful campaigning, yet much of its practical experience has been lost. The great practitioners of the operational art--Patton, Bradley, Ridgeway, and their like--are gone. Efforts are now underway to identify the parameters of the operational level of war and to rediscover the principles which guided past military campaigns. These studies have begun to appear in professional service journals and may eventually find their way into a family of doctrinal manuals. Unfortunately, the Army's analysis of the operational level of war is just getting underway.

The Army's past fascination with battlefield techniques and military technology produced a generation of officers that has given little thought to the operational level of war. This study provides an introduction to military campaigning

and the operational art for students new to these discussions. Its aim is to examine three important themes: the jargon used to frame the operational environment, the role of the operational level of war commander, and the principles which guide campaign planning.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Lieutenant Colonel L.D. Holder, "A New Day for Operational Art," ARMY Magazine, p. 22.

## CHAPTER II

### THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

This chapter deals with a number of concepts which provide a framework for operational level of war studies: the connection between national interests and military strategy, the three basic levels of war (strategic, operational, and tactical), theaters of war and theaters of operations, and the relationship of U.S. echelons of command to the levels of war.

#### NATIONAL INTERESTS AND STRATEGY

As we shall see, the operational art involves the use of armed forces to carry out a military strategy. Before discussing the operational level of war, it is important to briefly summarize the relationship between national interests, national strategy, and military strategy.

The term, national interest, refers to a country's "perceived needs and aspirations in relation to other sovereign states. . . ."<sup>1</sup> The long term national interests of the U.S. are frequently described in terms of security, economic well-being, favorable world order, and democratic ideology.<sup>2</sup> Nations possess a variety of ways in which they can pursue their policy interests. Among these are economic, political, psychological, and military instruments of power. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) define national strategy as "the art and

science of developing and using . . . [these instruments of power] . . . during peace and war to secure national objectives."<sup>3</sup> Thus, military strategy, a component of national strategy, may be viewed "as [the employment of] the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy by the application or the threat of forces."<sup>4</sup> In this context, the operational level of war is seen as the link between battles and military strategy; the campaign is the means to achieve that strategy.

#### THE THREE LEVELS OF WAR

The Army's capstone doctrinal guide, FM 100-5: Operations, divides war into three levels of effort: At the strategic level, the conditions of conflict are set, theaters of war established, military forces allocated, and broad military goals assigned. At the operational level, military forces are employed to attain "strategic goals in a theater of war or theater of operations through the design, organization, conduct of campaigns and major operations." At the tactical level, the emphasis is upon the application of military force to achieve successful outcomes in battles and engagements. Ideally, sound tactics win battles which determine the course of campaigns. Successful campaigns contribute to achievement of militarily strategic goals.<sup>5</sup>

## THEATERS OF WAR AND THEATERS OF OPERATIONS

The distinction between a theater of war and a theater of operation in terms of the operational art is an important one. A theater of war is a broad geographic area wherein land, air, and sea operations are directed toward a common strategic aim. Within this area, military operations are directed against a single enemy or coalition of enemy forces. From a U.S. perspective, a theater of war is roughly analogous to one of the five unified commands established in the JCS Unified Command Plan. Because of the size of the region, such commands are joint service organizations commanded by a single unified CINC. A CINC may elect to subdivide his command by creating one or more theaters of operation(s), giving a subordinate joint and/or combined commander responsibility for command and control of a smaller geographic area. The decision to divide a theater of war into theaters of operation is a significant one and is based upon span of control and the desirability of operating simultaneously on geographically separated "lines of operation." Lines of operation, a central theme in many operational studies, are described in Appendix B, FM 100-5. They are defined as the "directional orientation of a force in relation to the enemy . . . [connecting] the force with its base or bases of operation on the one hand and its operational objective on the other."<sup>6</sup> For example, from a NATO perspective, the European land mass has been divided into northern, central, and southern regions--each a theater of operations fighting on

separate yet coordinated lines of operation against Warsaw Pact forces.<sup>7</sup> In this illustration, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SHAPE) is the theater of war commander. CINC North, headquartered in Norway, CINCENT in the Netherlands, and CINC South in Italy are theater of operations commanders.

#### ECHELONS OF COMMAND

Current U.S. Army doctrine states that no echelon of command is solely concerned with the operational art.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, some educated guesses can be made. It is fairly clear that the theater of war CINC with his responsibilities for blending military means with other instruments of power functions primarily at the strategic level of war. One of the by-products of his efforts is a military strategy for the theater, frequently expressed as a theater campaign plan. At the operational level of war, the key players are army, army group, and joint task force commanders. Functioning within the context of a theater of operations, they must be aware of the influence of other instruments of power but, unlike the theater of war CINC, their task is primarily military in nature. They accomplish these responsibilities through the planning and execution of military campaigns. Corps and lower level commanders normally focus upon purely military matters--winning battles--and operate within the tactical realm of military conflict.

Needless to say, the foregoing assignment of specific U.S. echelons of command to each of the three levels of war is somewhat arbitrary. One can suppose any number of exceptions. For example, a theater of war CINC could elect to carry out both strategic and operational level responsibilities and not divide his command into theaters of operation. Moreover, corps and divisions may on occasion carry out extended military operations which could rightly be described as operational level of war campaigns. And the list of variations might go on. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, the connection between theaters of war, theaters of operation, and subordinate commands with the three respective levels of war seems most appropriate.

#### ENDNOTES

7. 1. Donald E. Nuechterlein, America Over Committed, p. 350.
2. Ibid., p. 8.
3. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Publication Number 1, p. 350.
4. Ibid., p. 232.
5. U.S. Army FM 100-5: Operations, pp. 9-11.
6. Ibid., p. 180.
7. Colonel Ronald D'Amura, "Campaigns: The Essence of Operational Warfare" in Warfighting Overview--Operational Level, ed. by Lieutenant Colonel Clayton Newell, pp. 16-17.
8. U.S. Army FM 100-5: Operations, p. 10.

## CHAPTER III

### THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR COMMANDER

The role of the commander at the operational level of war is a topic of a significant interest and discussion. A number of efforts have been made to describe the requirements of senior command in terms of strategic perspective, the capability to act on a "grand scale," the ability to organize a harmonious multi-service team, and so on. Unfortunately, the responsibilities of strategic and operational levels of war commanders are frequently blurred by emerging doctrine. This chapter discusses senior command, distinguishing strategic and operational responsibilities where possible, in terms of four operational themes: strategic aim, centers of gravity, joint responsibilities, and logistics.

#### STRATEGIC AIM

Perhaps the bedrock of command at the strategic level of war is the requirement to gain militarily strategic objectives through the application of military force or threat of such force. As mentioned earlier, the theater of war CINC translates national military strategy, developed by the JCS and National Command Authority (NCA) into a regional military strategy. Of necessity, he must fully appreciate the vital interests of the U.S. and its allies within his theater. He considers a wide



variety of political, economic, psychological, geographic, and military factors--including air, land, and sea correlations of forces. His analysis results in a set of strategic aims which are presented as ways, means and ends.<sup>1</sup> While the theater of war CINC examines a variety of regional and global issues, the theater of operations commander, operating primarily at the operational level of war, focuses more narrowly on the military aspects of the conflict to develop his supporting campaign plan. Guided by the CINC's intent, he develops a supporting campaign plan which sequences military action and logistical support against the enemy's center of gravity. His aim is to achieve assigned objectives through superior application of military force. At the tactical level of war, commanders concentrate purely upon military objectives. "Their responsibility must be to destroy enemy forces, seize specific objectives, or otherwise apply military force to accomplish missions prescribed at the operational level."<sup>2</sup>

#### CENTERS OF GRAVITY

Center of gravity is a key operational term. It is based upon the idea that military combatants, whether they are nations, military coalitions, or armies, are composed of a number of complex components.<sup>3</sup> The success of the combatant is tied to the success of individual components. Like any complex organization, some elements are more important than others. If one of these components is damaged, the resulting

loss unbalances the structure and momentum of the whole. Clausewitz describes the center of gravity as "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends."<sup>4</sup> The destruction of enemy centers of gravity and the protection of friendly sources of strength is a fundamental responsibility of strategic and operational level of war commanders.

Centers of gravity, according to FM 100-5, may exist at the tactical level in the form of an enemy headquarters or key terrain; however, the concept reaches its full dimension at the higher levels of war.<sup>5</sup> At the operational level, the center of gravity may take the form of the destruction of the enemy's capital, the interdiction of key lines of communication, or the seizure of terrain which preempts enemy's plan for the initiation of hostilities. At the strategic level, less tangible centers of gravity can be foreseen--the will of the enemy's populace, the morale of his military forces, or the cohesion of his alliances, to name a few. Regardless of form, the selection of centers of gravity is a key activity at strategic and operational levels of war.

#### JOINT RESPONSIBILITY

A unique characteristic of strategic and operational levels of command relates to the commander's responsibility for developing an appropriate joint and/or combined organizational structure. The character of the campaign is determined by the geographic nature of the region (continental, maritime, or

mixed) and the nature of the forces available to the commander. Within these parameters, commanders at both strategic and operational levels exercise broad latitude in the organization of joint and combined forces to execute the theater and theater of operations campaigns. Commanders at the strategic level do not fight battles but, rather, structure forces and allocate resources to permit the successful prosecution of campaigns. Their counterparts at the operational level of war focus upon the planning and execution of campaigns, but also have a significant hand in force structure and resource allocation. Both commanders must deal with three organizational challenges: the selection of appropriate subordinate commanders, the development of unit staffs, and the task organization of allocated land, air, and sea forces. In terms of selecting subordinates, the theater of war CINC and his operational level of war commanders identify leaders who are capable of operating within their respective management styles. Likewise, staffs at both levels must demonstrate "high performance" qualities, plan and execute simultaneously, communicate effectively across service and national boundaries, and possess the initiative and sense of perspective to work within the commander's intent.<sup>6</sup> One of the most challenging requirements faced by senior command is that associated with the development of task organizations for theaters of war and theaters of operation. In such circumstances, service components are frequently large and complex. Senior commanders must be sensitive to service

(and national) strengths and weaknesses, peculiarities in modes of operation, the appropriate allocation of responsibilities, and so on. Unfortunately, there is no simple formula for unified action. However, the degree to which strategic and operational level commanders can synchronize the diverse organizational aspects of their commands is often a significant factor in success or failure.

#### EMPHASIS ON LOGISTICS

A final distinction between senior commanders and their tactical counterparts is the relative level of interest and degree of influence senior leaders have on logistical matters. As mentioned above, the theater of war CINC structures his force so as to best accomplish theater strategic objectives. The theater of operations commander accomplishes a similar task in terms of organizing a force to carry out his campaign objectives. Their analyses concentrate on strategic aims, available forces, resources, and limitations. Of necessity, the senior level of war commander (strategic and operational) examines deployment rates, "tooth to tail ratios," and a number of other logistical factors which contribute to the overall plan. This logistical evaluation must consider the means of supporting and/or extending operational reach. The focus of this effort is upon echeloned logistical support, lines of communication, support bases and airfields, host nation agreements, military equipment sales, etc. At both the

strategic and operational levels, the commander must consider his requirement for personnel, military equipment, and natural resources in a truly macro sense. Occasionally, basing requirements and planned logistical activities are of such importance that they become the focus of the overall operational effort. In short, strategic and operational level of war commanders have a greater role in logistical planning and operations than their counterparts at the tactical level.<sup>7</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

1. Lieutenant Colonel Clayton Newell, "Balancing the Ends, Ways and Means," ARMY Magazine, August 1986, p. 25.

2. Lieutenant Colonel Clayton Newell, "Levels of War," p. 6.

3. U.S. Army FM 100-5: Operations, p. 179.

4. Karl von Clausewitz, On War, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, pp. 595-596.

5. U.S. Army FM 100-5: Operations, p. 179.

6. Major General Albin G. Wheeler, Operational Sustainment, lecture, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 1987.

7. Ibid.

## CHAPTER IV

### CAMPAIGNING

As mentioned earlier, the Army's interest in campaigning lapsed for a number of years. As a consequence, efforts to develop joint doctrine for combining air, land, and sea functions have been stifled. A recent study of the planning activities of the nation's unified command headquarters concluded that there is less agreement on what campaign plans are and who should prepare them than anyone might suspect.<sup>1</sup> This chapter deals with two questions: What is a military campaign? What is campaign planning?

#### THE CAMPAIGN

FM 100-5 defines the campaign as a "sequence of joint actions to attain strategic objectives in a theater of war."<sup>2</sup> As we know, the military campaign is the method and the means by which operational commanders employ force and other resources to achieve the objectives assigned by strategic level of war commanders. In general, campaigns are characterized by (1) an orientation upon the enemy center of gravity, as already discussed, (2) a series of military actions, including major unit operations and battles designed to attain decisive results, and (3) the synchronization of available resources, including air, land, and sea components. Succinctly stated, the campaign

is the principal wartime activity of operational commanders and includes actions associated with the deployment, employment, and sustainment of military forces.

#### THE CAMPAIGN PLAN

The campaign plan, produced at both strategic and operational levels, provides direction for subordinates, mapping out a sequence of actions which will achieve assigned (or in some cases derived) objectives. The campaign plan is based upon the commander's definition of operational success (sometimes called "vision")<sup>3</sup> and his conception of the circumstances necessary to bring about those conditions of success (called the commander's concept). Success at the operational level is frequently defined in terms of the surrender of enemy forces, capture of the opponent's capital, or destruction of his economic powerbase. However, other less dramatic measures of success are conceivable. In a low intensity conflict, for example, success may be measured in terms of increased popular support or the reduction of terrorist activities. Moreover, in a theater of war with several theaters of operations, a simultaneous defeat of the enemy in each region is rarely possible. Thus, operational success in a secondary theater of operations may be defined initially in terms of a military stalemate where the enemy's combat power is drained off from other areas of conflict. Regardless of specific circumstances,

subordinates must gain a clear understanding of the commander's vision and concept from the campaign plan.<sup>4</sup>

#### Phases, Branches, and Sequels

Besides identifying operational success, the campaign plan provides a broad concept of operations and sustainment. This concept normally lays out a sequence of military actions which are expected to lead to the achievement of assigned strategic objectives. In some cases, the plan may begin with pre-hostility efforts and culminate with the cessation of conflict. In others, the plan may be more narrowly proscribed. Regardless, the initial and terminal phases of the campaign plan are clearly expressed. Because of "the fog and friction of war," mid-phases are normally less finely detailed and subordinate commanders must be prepared to operate with less specific guidance.<sup>5</sup> When alternative schemes of achieving operational success (i.e., an advance along alternative lines of operation, a change in dispositions, etc.) are built into the concept as contingency plans, they are called "branches." A campaign plan with branches provides the operational level of war commander with the flexibility to "fight, decline battle, or fight in a different way than originally intended."<sup>6</sup> Contingency plans which address the actions of forces immediately following battles or major unit actions are described in the parlance of campaign planning as "sequels." These supplementary plans provide follow-on instructions concerning how operational success is to be exploited or setbacks minimized.<sup>7</sup>



### Culminating Points

Another concept worth mentioning within the context of campaign sequencing is the culminating point. Described in detail in Appendix B to FM 100-5, culminating points are reached when the attacker arrives at a point where he loses more operational advantage than he gains. As the offensive nears a culminating point, the attacker risks the loss of his force, his lines of communication and means of support or he risks overwhelming retaliation by the enemy. In operational level theory, the attainment of assigned objectives is to be achieved before the culminating point is reached. Conversely, the defender attempts to hasten the culminating point so he can go over to the offensive. Of necessity, the campaign planner analyzes likely culminating points before phasing the operation.<sup>8</sup>

### Jointness

Before moving to a broader discussion of campaigning, it is important to note the essential "jointness" of most campaign planning. Since the campaign plan addresses the employment of forces across a large geographic area (a theater of operations), the plan normally provides a scheme for synchronizing air, land, and sea components into synergistic effort. Although little has been written about this subject, suffice it to say that the campaign plan accomplishes this by establishing command and control relationships and assigning operational and sustaining tasks to allocated forces.<sup>9</sup>

## OPERATIONAL FUNCTIONS

Campaigning is frequently described in terms of five major operational functions: intelligence, maneuver, fires, logistics (also called sustainment), and deception. This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of each.

### Intelligence

Intelligence is central to operational design. The theater of operations commander is normally responsible for a large geographic area and a sizeable military force. His campaign plan must be laid out as far in advance as is possible. Of necessity, he anticipates enemy intent, future dispositions, and probable reactions so that he can develop appropriate countermeasures. His operational level of war responsibilities are such that he must be cognizant of political, economic, and psychological factors which will affect enemy decision making. In general, he takes a keen interest in enemy command and control and the flexibility and aggressiveness of the opposing operational commander; however, his overriding aim is the selection of the enemy center of gravity. To some degree, these needs can be met by national intelligence means available to the theater of war CINC. In other instances, particularly in low-intensity conflicts, he may be supported by the more narrowly defined tactical intelligence developed at corps level and below.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of source, analysis of information at the operational level of war will be complex. The size and heterogeneity of the area of operations may complicate targeting. Important indicators may be overlooked as "noise" because of the over-abundance of information. Moreover, information concerning the enemy's intent and center of gravity may be shielded by nationally directed enemy deception efforts. Once processed, such intelligence may be difficult to protect within the theater of operations organization if it is multinational. Doubts about the reliability of the data collected and unique methods of handling must be anticipated among allies.<sup>11</sup>

#### Maneuver

Operational maneuver has been described as the essence of military campaigning.<sup>12</sup> In this light, maneuver refers to the movement of large forces into or within a theater of operations to achieve decisive results leading to the accomplishment of assigned objectives. The operational commander, in preparing his campaign plan, seeks to gain advantage through superior distribution of his force--on a grand scale. He can accomplish this in any number of ways: through deployments and repositioning, through attacks, feints, and demonstrations, and by preparing defenses, traps, and obstacles. In the offense, the aim is to attain the initiative so as to disrupt the enemy's freedom of action and destroy his center of gravity. In the defense, the aim is to recapture the initiative, disrupt his timetable and

freedom of action so as to achieve a decisive result, or to take up the offensive.<sup>13</sup>

### Operational Fires

The importance of fire support to maneuver at the tactical level of war is axiomatic. At the operational level, fires may be employed in one of two ways: in combination with maneuver as fire support or separate from maneuver as an independent means to bring about decisive results. In the traditional role, fires may be employed to provide operational depth or seal off portions of the battlefield to facilitate the action of maneuvering elements. In the "stand alone" role, operational fires are used to destroy decisive targets such as strategic command and control facilities, nuclear weapons systems, or key logistical support facilities. Included within operational fire resources are: conventional artillery, rocketry, naval gunfire, air forces, and nuclear and chemical weapons.<sup>14</sup>

### Operational Sustainment

Operational sustainment, described earlier in connection with the role of the theater of operations commander, refers to those activities which support military campaigns. Described in FM 100-16: Echelons Above Corps, its central concepts are: the selection lines of communication (LOCs) and staging areas and the management of sustainment priorities and force expansion.<sup>15</sup>

## Operational Deception

Deception at the operational level of war is among the most popular themes in operational design. Like all deception, its aim is to "create a false picture of reality"<sup>16</sup> and thereby gain an advantage over the enemy. The target of operational deception is the mind of the opposing operational commander. Closely aligned with operational intelligence efforts, theater of operations deception begins with an appreciation of the enemy commander's sources of information, personal presumptions, and biases.<sup>17</sup> Information which tends to confirm enemy expectations is more likely to be accepted at face value than apparently contradictory data. In addition, a highly plausible deception story is more easily sustained since it is likely to gain increasing enemy acceptance over time. Coordinated with theater and tactical efforts, operational deception is judged in terms of its contribution to other operational functions. If history is a guide, operational deception offers opportunities for decisive results.

### ENDNOTES

1. Colonel William M. Mendel and Lieutenant Colonel Floyd T. Banks, Campaign Planning, pp. 5-15.
2. U.S. Army FM 100-5: Operations, p. 10.
3. The Commander's "vision" may incorporate his concept of operation.
4. U.S. Army FM 100-6: Large Unit Operations, pp. 4-5 to 4-8.

5. Colonel John F. Meehan, "The Operational Trilogy," Parameters, p. 16.

6. Lieutenant Colonel L.D. Holder, "A New Day for Operational Art," ARMY Magazine, p. 27.

7. Ibid.

8. U.S. Army FM 100-5: Operations, pp. 181-182.

9. U.S. Army Command and General Staff College FM 100-6 (Coordinating Draft): Large Unit Operations, p. 4-2.

10. The U.S. Army Intelligence School believes that the operational level commander's intelligence needs can not be met by simple "fusion" of strategic and tactical intelligence. For a rationale for a separate operation level of war intelligence effort, see Captain Buel's Intelligence at the Operational Level of War: Operational - Level of War Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield, pp. 308.

11. U.S. Army FM 100-6: Large Unit Operations, pp. 3-8 to 3-11.

12. Lieutenant Colonel Newell, "Balancing Ends, Ways and Means," ARMY Magazine, p. 32.

13. Lieutenant Colonel L.D. Holder, "A New Day for Operational Art," ARMY Magazine, p. 27.

14. Ibid., p. 28.

15. U.S. Army FM 100-5: Operations, p. 70.

16. U.S. Army FM 100-6: Large Unit Operations, p. 3-19.

17. Colonel Justin R. Hughes, et al., Campaign Planning, p. 62.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The U.S. Army has lacked a coherent theory of long term, large scale operations for some time. The operational level of war appears to fill this void. The new "operational" language--centers of gravity, theaters of operation, culminating points, branches and sequels--represents an effort to frame the operational environment. Discussion of the role of the operational level commander is based upon a recognition that he faces a complex milieu significantly different from both political-military strategy and tactical battlefield counterparts. Campaign studies are aimed at the development of fundamentals for large unit operations. Each of these undertakings are attempts to flesh out a new doctrinal architecture.

In the interest of brevity, this study has raced through a number of complex subjects. It would be a mistake to assume that an indepth treatment of the operational art has been presented or that a broad consensus exists on all of the concepts discussed. Rather, the opposite is true, and a number of debates are underway.

The reader should not be disappointed by this uncertainty. The study of the operational level of war is important and promises more for the future. Operational design provides a theory of war which connects battles in a logical way to

national strategy. In the U.S. Army's last war, the absence of the operational art had a profound effect. Hopefully, the reader is better equipped to participate in future discussions of the operational level of war.



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